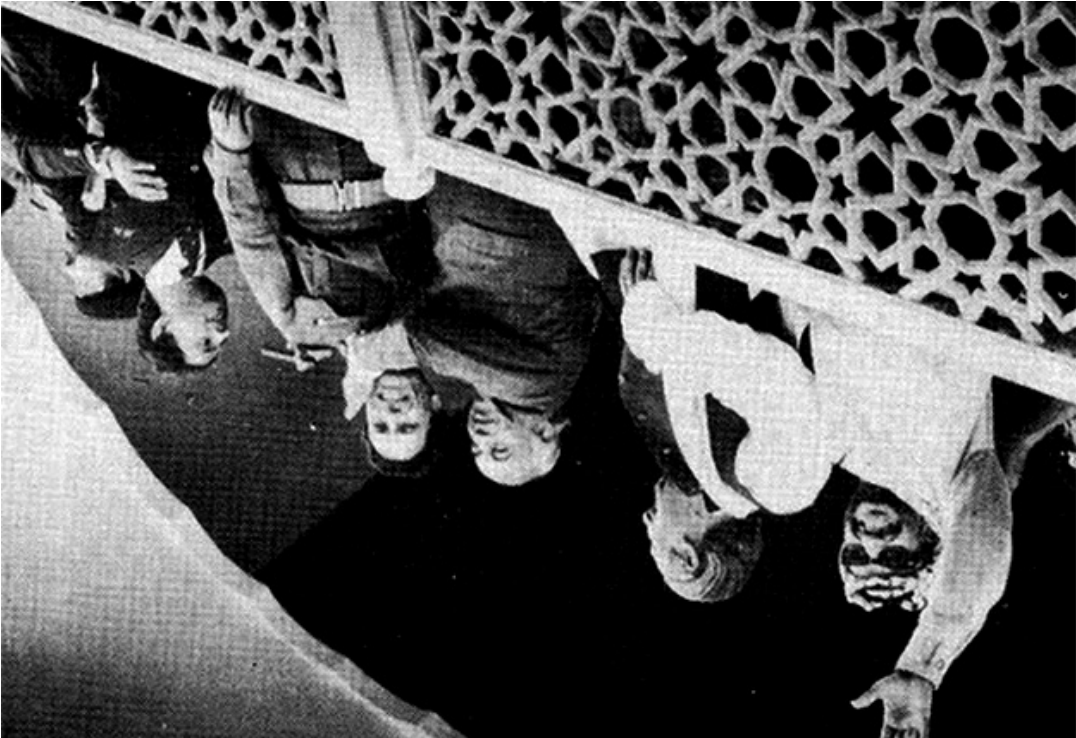


Strict interpretations

A reply to Atiya Khan

Manan Ahmed



Organization of the Islamic Conference held in Lahore, Pakistan in 1974. After promulgating an explicitly Islamic Constitution in 1973, Bhutto hosted the conference to launch a new, Islam-oriented diplomacy for Pakistan.

Khan in her *Playpus Review* article "The poverty of Pakistan's politics," I represent "a sad symptom of the failure of the intellectual class in time of crisis," in Khan's telling, it is the intellectual Left which failed (in Pakistan, and under its sad banner now so congregate blind and mute liberals such as myself. It is a strong, and harshly delivered, criticism and I take it very seriously. Let me begin, however, by engaging Khan on her reading of Pakistan's past. Khan posits that there was once a golden age of left-labor politics in Pakistan, first five years of its existence. This was a time when trade unions "flourished" in industries across Pakistan, so much so, she argues, that some two hundred unions could claim over 400,000 workers as rank-and-file members by 1951. This golden age of labor curiously coincides, according to Khan, with the "failures of the Left after World War II." Though the labor unions had the organizational skills and mass appeal to push for real reform, the Left allowed those advantages to dissipate on account of the theoretical confusion and imaginative limitations born of Stalinist notions of country-based

seriously misrepresents or elides actualities. In her telling, Ayub Khan's dictatorial regime collapses not because of an all-out military revolt and concomitant withdrawal of U.S. support, but because of labor strikes, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—Foreign Minister and heir-apparent for Ayub Khan and an elite landowner—becomes in Khan's piece a populist leader by seducing the military brass as the only West Pakistani leader capable of holding back East Pakistani domination. Similarly, in Khan's narrative Zia-ul-Haq is the original architect of Islamization, whereas in fact the policies and practices of Islamization began under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as early as 1973.¹³ Khan stresses "Chinese opportunism" in the rise of the Afghan Taliban rather than highlighting the primary force of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and of joint U.S.-Pakistani efforts to train a local militia. She dismisses the Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto regimes of the late 1980s and 1990s as no more than the realization of the Taliban's agenda "to find an ally across the Khyber Pass," rather than seeing them as democ-

critical governments (however flawed) elected by the people of Pakistan. This, of course, not only lends a far greater influence to the Afghan Taliban but also exaggerates the control those civilian governments exercised over the Pakistani military. Khan does not explain how the Taliban could set the agenda for Pakistan in the 1988 or 1993 elections when, until 1996, they were just one of a number of factions engaged in the brutal civil war then raging in Afghanistan. There are other strange lacunae buried in her narrative. She leaves unspecified who, or what, this confused and ineffective "left" in Pakistan actually was. From what class was it drawn and in which cities? Or how did the failure to enact land reform, along with the interference squabbling of leftist organizations and the succession of U.S.-backed military dictatorships, affect this history? The history of the Left and labor in Pakistan is certainly one of the important and largely unexamined factors in our collective efforts to undertake the present. I am keen on seeing Khan make that case, but she will have to do so with far greater nuance, and with fewer liberties taken with the facts, than presented in her piece.

Yet even if Khan's various readings of Pakistani history were defensible, her tacit embrace of U.S. imperial policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not. She dismisses as so much bellyaching my concern for the humanitarian crisis caused by the Pakistani military offensives in Swat, Waziristan, and Baluchistan, as well as the political crisis caused almost daily by unmanned drone attacks. For Khan, these concerns merely provide cover to the Taliban and act as a screen for their crypto-fascism. Consequently, U.S. military strategies ought to be supported, as they are the only means available for combating the Taliban. But it is hard for me to imagine that far from the scorched-house and corpses of Swat and Waziristan anything resembling an international Left could possibly appear. More likely, these policies will radicalize ever larger segments of the population. More damagingly, the military-only strategies create new support networks for Islamist radicals and silence the voices of those who argue for a secular and progressive Pakistan. For Khan, pinning this out that makes me either a nationalist or a neoliberal.

I am interested neither in labels nor in identity politics. I consider myself a student of history. As is obvious, I am not providing apologies for the Taliban, but articulating a historically and politically precise context within which to understand the many groups uncritically labelled "Taliban." Similar efforts seem to be enjoying widespread acceptance among NATO commanders in Afghanistan, but such attentiveness to cultural and political analyses of Pakistan, still, I suspect that such effort towards precision and clarity alone leads towards an understanding of how the "Taliban" emerged in Pakistan, how they currently operate, and, therefore, how they might best be combated. These contexts are utterly invisible from the drone's eye view.

A growing chorus of concerned voices now states that the

"Interpretations" continues on page 4

an uncritical embrace of U.S. military might, as it exerts any local law, advance the purposes of the Taliban more than anyone else's. Yet, there are no critical voices in the larger U.S. public speaking against America's policies toward Pakistan. My op-ed for the *Nation*, to which Khan takes such exception, was just such an effort. It sought to contextualize the "Taliban are coming" hysteria, arguing that this deliberately hinders any attempt to neutralize the Taliban and thus to effectively neutralize them. The Pakistani military, now being feted with billions for fighting the Taliban, is the same Pakistani military that created the Taliban in the 1990s. The CIA that currently conducts drone missile attacks against al-Qaeda is the same CIA that in the 1980s provided the mujahideen with Stinger missiles and called them "freedom fighters." More precisely: I have little faith in the healing power of U.S. bombs.

I remain deeply troubled by the violence unleashed by these "Taliban" organizations against Pakistan's cities and inhabitants. If Khan had bothered to look beyond my short piece in the *Nation*, she would have found ample evidence on my blog that I have, for the past five years, consistently spoken and written against the religious extremists and for democracy and liberality in Pakistan. I have written consistently against the Pakistani military elite and its corrosive politics and I have argued for a check on rank U.S. policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan;³ it is fair to argue that I lay too much stress on

The Taliban are coming, and far less effort on denouncing policies and mass media, and completely responsible for their terror contempt, and completely responsible for their terror contempt, every single Taliban atrocity. But it is simplistic to assume that I cannot hold the Taliban in utter contempt, maintaining that the U.S.-Pakistani understandings of the policies based on them are misguided.⁴ The gist of my *Nation* piece was this: the Pakistani

can overturn the state of Pakistan. They are not a mortal threat. This is now empirically true since the Taliban were famously within 60 miles of Islamabad in March 2009 and, well, Islamabad still stands—however bloodied. We heard no more about the imminent demise of Pakistan once the Pakistan army mobilized and created a million internally displaced citizens. We heard little about the crisis of Pakistan once another front was opened up in northern Waziristan. The way I understand it, this heightening of paranoia about the Taliban was not concerned with the realities on the ground in Pakistan but rather with the ideological and political landscape in Washington D.C. and Islamabad. Absent from the discussion, and the policies, were the historical concerns of the people of the region. This, I submit, is not only short-sighted but also strategically self-defeat-

ing: In the last year alone, 3,021 civilians were killed in Pakistan in terrorist attacks and nearly 8,000 were injured. Additionally, nearly a million were displaced due to military operations. Even for a nation of 170 million,

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Strict interpretations

A reply to Atiya Khan

Manan Ahmed

Rosa Luxemburg's legacy

A reply to Jerzy Sobotta

Uli vom Hagen

Rejoinder to David Black

On Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*

Chris Cutrone

Totality versus theory

Left cognition and social change

Joshua Howard

What are intellectuals good for?

A discussion with George Scialabba

Spencer A. Leonard

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Joshua Howard

GEORG LUKÁCS INTRODUCED the notion of totality as a major theme for Western Marxism in his work *History and Class Consciousness*, where he wrote,

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts, is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science...Proletarian science is revolutionary not just by virtue of its revolutionary ideas which it opposes to bourgeois society, but above all because of its method. The *primacy* of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science.¹

I wish to take issue not only with the idea Lukács expresses here of totality as a standpoint or point of view from which both to critique the partiality of other viewpoints and to theoretically grasp capitalist society, but also with later Frankfurt School intellectuals, Western Marxists more generally, as well as leading trends in Continental Philosophy that question the very possibility of such a standpoint. For while these anti-totality positions lament the impossibility of such a total understanding while others celebrate it—extending their skepticism also to the practical questions concerning the revolutionary subjects that are supposed to embody or make possible the critique—neither offers any real break from the problems in the Western Marxist notion of totality. Indeed, their perspectives often assume the very concept of totality they critique and thus fall back into the orbit of these problems. Therefore, rather than taking sides in this debate, I wish instead to critique the assumptions common to both sides.

The debate, which has proven to be a circular and unproductive one, has actually served to hinder the development of Marxist theory. This is partly because holistic modes of thinking stand opposed to theoretical reason, in general, and to Marx’s theories, in particular. As a result, Marx’s ideas usually come burdened with philosophical assumptions that distort them, as well as the nature of theory itself and its role in social change. Instead of theories, Western Marxists have sought a method. This search for method coupled with holistic thinking has turned Marxism into a worldview that seems to require that its adherents undergo a religious conversion to arrive at faith, rather than a rational process of assessing a set of theories against reality and other theories. There is no method that will unlock the secrets of capitalist society or guarantee revolutionary results. Despite all

the searches for method, there is nothing special about Marx’s theorizing process that separates it from other modes of theoretical reasoning.

In what follows I try to show in a preliminary way how the category of totality and the attendant sense of method have both served to hinder the understanding of Marx’s critique of capital and have had an enervating effect on the ability of Western Marxists to imagine alternatives to capitalism. But this applies well beyond Western Marxism, and a lot of what I say applies to the radical Left in general. This is because the main issue, I believe, concerns a certain way of thinking about capitalist society as a total system.

From Marx’s analysis of capital, as an integrated process of production, distribution, and exchange of value, Western Marxists tend to move, largely through unsubstantiated, analogical thinking, to a theory of capitalist society as a whole, as a completely integrated system that affects everything we think and do. This generates in turn the need for an external position from which to critique this society and a frustrated desire to live outside the system. From here it is but a short step to despairing of ever achieving such a position. But, as soon as one poses the problem in terms of being “inside” or “outside” capitalism, the game is over. This is not least because of the theoretical and practical consequences that flow from Lukács’s claim about the “all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts.”

By regarding capitalism as a total system, encompassing all of society, holistic views such as Lukács’s have also included as part of capitalist totality our very consciousness, so that our inner thoughts themselves are supposed to embody or enact this all-consuming total ideology, which appears to us perfectly commonplace, or “reified” as Lukács says. Radical critics trace all problems of modern society back to capitalism. Their radicalism itself is measured by how much they refuse this total ideology and reject the entire culture. Just as capitalism is seen to mediate everything we do and think, so revolution comes to be imagined as something that entails changing all of society, down to our consciousness.

One practical consequence of this view is that revolution comes to seem impossible, because, well, a scenario in which everything changes is impossible. Social change has never and will never happen this way. And so it is hard to convince rational people of the viability of a revolution against a Lukácsian totality. If a movement to change society requires people first to adopt an entire new worldview, then perhaps we should wonder whether such a vision of social change is not solely a construct of the intelligentsia built into a vision of the world with which

they flatter themselves, rather than as a genuinely emancipatory vision opening a viable path towards real social change to benefit everyone.

A second theoretical consequence is that once the ontological priority of the whole over the parts is posited, including the dependence of thought on society, then one must also posit the impossibility of conceiving any alternative to this totality or a theory of how any change is possible. As products of the whole, everything that is thought reflects that whole and is bound by it.

Except, of course, when it comes to the intellectual equipped with the right method, who seems somehow not only able to conceive the whole predicament, but, having scaled the heights of Enlightenment, can direct the benighted masses towards the Promised Land. No matter how much it is denied, such intellectual vanguardism seems built into the very diagnosis of the problem as one of being inside or outside of a total social system. This logic is, of course, characteristic of the Kautskyan/Leninist theory of the vanguardist road to socialism and the Trotskyist/Maoist problem of leadership, but it is also very typical of other flawed critiques of modern society on the radical Left that pit a knowledgeable elite against the rest of society. This “solution” turns from simple top-down elitism to incoherence when capitalism is conceived as an all-pervasive totality. What then gives intellectuals access to this privileged viewpoint? I lack the space to unfold from their inner epistemological contradictions all the vicissitudes of this view over the past century. Rather than concluding that no one can have such access, no one can occupy such a perspective, the upshot seems to be that this is a bad (and unnecessary) way of posing the problem. Western Marxists, and leftists generally, erect this obstacle for themselves. Thinking everyone else is absorbed by the system, it is, in fact, a system of their very own creation that ultimately stems from their disappointment with the working class’s failure to act according to their expectations. In true dialectical form, the diagnosis of one-dimensionality is a symptom expressing its own one-dimensionality. And much of this has to do with the holistic thinking I wish to critique.

The Trap of Holism

I want to point to two essential aspects of this prevalent notion of totality, (1) holism about society, or “sociological holism,” and (2) holism about beliefs, or “ideological holism.”

Sociological holism holds that everything in society is part of an integrated whole, with the implication that everything within it is co-opted or absorbed by this whole. On such a view, each component part and every event become an instance of the total system. This process of incorporation is commonly expressed as a logic of colonization whereby contact with a vague, general cultural process—in this case, commodification—irrevocably homogenizes. Becoming commodified is the sign of being integrated into and trapped by the system; as everything has a price, so everything serves capital. Now that all is supposedly commodified, even that which was previously thought to be outside or untouched by capital, such as nature, is no longer. The list extends to include human

nature, the unconscious, and ultimately subjectivity itself.

Where Marx specifically analyzed the reification of labor as value, as an objective aspect of the commodity, Lukács turned reification as such into a general organizing principle of capitalist society and its institutions. It is no accident that this widely used concept of commodification can be seamlessly substituted with sociological notions such as Max Weber’s rationalization or Georg Simmel’s objective culture, without losing its meaning. That is because of the divide that stretches between Marx and Lukács. Rather than any Marxist, Weber and Simmel had the largest influence on Lukács’s attempt to link Marx’s analysis of the commodity form to these sociological notions to give them a certain political, anti-capitalist twist, but failed to actually clarify or advance Marx’s theoretical project. Thus, rather than being based on Marx’s analysis of commodity production, reification has the character of a general malaise of modernity, similar to that diagnosed by Weber as an iron cage of capitalist rationalization or by Simmel as the tragedy of culture. Nowadays it is even fashionable to lament reification and commodification, so that it is possible to sound “Marxist” without understanding the specifics of Marx’s analysis of commodity production in Capital.

This holism with respect to society has also been referred to as the real subsumption of society by capital. But this concept is not Marx’s. Many people, most recently Hardt and Negri, with their marriage of Marx and Foucault, mistake Marx’s concept of the real subsumption of labor under capital to mean the real subsumption of the laborer or of society as a whole under capital, so that capitalist society becomes equivalent to capital. How do we escape from this totalizing predicament? Either Marxism (as a method, of course) is the totalizing perspective we need to counter a totalizing social process, or else we can have no such total perspective; there is no outside, so we can only occupy the cracks in the system. Just because Marx did not have such a theory does not mean such a theory is wrong. But Western Marxists have to confront the problems that arise from the logic of the argument.

Ideological holism, meanwhile, holds that the dominant ideology colors everything we believe or, rather, that what we believe stems from the social system itself. A corollary of ideological holism is that the meaning of every belief depends on the believer’s social location; it requires analysis in light of the totality to establish its meaning and significance in the light of history. On this view, every belief is connected to every other belief in a web of ideology, a symbolic system or worldview that perfectly locks into this form of life. Our beliefs are further determined by where we stand in this totality. Hence, you can have a “proletarian science” as opposed to a “bourgeois science.” A new society would naturally bring with it a new belief system for its individual parts, one that we cannot begin to imagine. In a post-capitalist society we would think differently, just as now we think differently from other cultures or historical periods. This would be akin to a conversion process from one worldview or paradigm to another. This holism of belief today has many names, but the logic is the same: Lukács’s reification of consciousness is a species of standpoint

“Totality” continues below

Totality, continued from above

epistemology, as is Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge; misunderstandings of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, the appropriation in the humanities and social sciences of Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigm, and Michel Foucault’s epistemes or disciplinary matrices, among others, are all perspectivist viewpoints.

Of course it is true that people do think different things based on the changing conditions of the reality that surrounds them. And, certainly, capitalism does significantly affect certain of these conditions, causing our beliefs and attitudes themselves to change. But these are empirical questions, not foregone conclusions. What I am challenging is the internal holism of this notion of a belief system and its necessary grounding in a form of society as a whole. People’s ideas are not as homogeneous nor as limited *a priori* by the type of society they belong to, contrary to what critical theorists have tended to believe. People basically make rational decisions about their choices in life. Changing conditions would naturally bring about changes in certain beliefs or attitudes, and a socialist society would change social conditions for the better in certain ways. But these would not depend upon, nor produce, some new type of person who thinks in a wholly new and different way.

Totality versus Theory

Holistic thinking seeks a theory of society as a whole or of history as a whole. The reason that Marx provided no such comprehensive theory of society or a theory of capitalist society is because he did not think it was necessary for his purposes and probably thought it impossible. Such a “theory” would attempt to leave nothing out and thus strive to be a theory of everything, but this would no longer be a theory in any real sense. A theory must range over a definite domain of phenomena. It must look for causal regularities and discover the causal mechanisms that underlie those regularities. That is true of theories in general, and of Marx’s theories of capital as a mode of production (conceived narrowly) and of historical materialism, in particular. Marx did not have a theory of everything, nor did he mean for his theories to explain everything.

Holistic accounts of capitalist society, on the other hand, individuate modes of production, social formations, forms of life, worldviews, paradigms, and so on, as wholes, meaning their “parts” depend on their place in the whole, rather than the whole depending on the individual parts. Thus there can be no fundamental change that is not a total change, one in which all the parts, being so dependent, are fundamentally altered. This makes no sense because, if there were no independent parts, if the whole were the only thing with any real independent existence, then there could be no change, certainly not from within the totality. We need not invoke Popper’s critique of utopian social engineering in favor of piecemeal change in order to see that there

is a theoretical inadequacy in such holistic thinking. It conceives capitalist society as an abstract, undifferentiated totality and the intellectual as somehow outside it. This can lead only to an abstract negation of society because it lacks any specificity with respect to capital as a totalizing process in anything more than its strict use by Marx in reference to capital’s subsumption of labor processes. Its ineffectiveness is due to its synthetic mode of cognition linking everything to everything else, largely eschewing the theorization of the actual causal mechanisms that run through this society. As a consequence, it is also a bad method from which to think of social change. Not only is there an effacement of how the different parts of this whole relate, no guidance can be derived as to how to get from this whole to the next. If every part is subsumed under the whole, if the parts are not seen as prior to the whole, then the whole must be changed from without. Some mysterious transitional period is usually delegated to the task of doing the actual work of moving us from capitalism to socialism, but this seems to be a placeholder for ignorance.

Pace Lukács, we do not need a method, but a theory to help bring about a new society. Contra Lukács, we do not need the category of totality. Quite the opposite, we cannot make any progress by declaring the ontological priority of the whole over the parts. Theory entails breaking down the whole and specifying the parts that constitute it. Totality stands opposed to theory because invoking totality absolves the theoretician from having to say anything definite about capitalism, socialism, or a social-economic revolution.

Economics and Social Change

Holistic thinking lays yet another trap for liberatory thought, for it inevitably leads to a view that sees capitalism, socialism, and the move from one to the other as a matter of the primacy of politics. And this is where the totalistic conception of capitalism is most at odds with Marx’s theorization of capital and of its relation to the rest of society. It explains why Leninists and Western Marxists alike are so eager to ditch the historical materialist understanding of how the economic structure of society determines the contours of the legal and political superstructure, a view typically denigrated as “economism.” It also explains why there has been a consistent lack of concern with the need to theorize socialism and its possibility.

Rather than economism, “politicism” has been the more severe theoretical problem in the history of Marxism. The problem is one that Marx identified in Jacobinism, whether in its original form or in that of a Blanquist or Bakuninist conspiratorial elite. On this view, revolution comes to be conceived as a matter of consciousness, politics, and will. Failure is due to false consciousness, a lack of leadership, and a weakness of will.

Marx’s analysis of Jacobinism as a political movement fundamentally divorced from the society that it seeks to change is apt here. The Jacobins treated economics as a side issue, believing that change comes externally, from a politics outside or above society. Marx critiqued such attempts to subsume economics under politics for ignoring the objective compulsions of the economy. Jacobinism is not only undesirable because it leads to authoritarianism, but it is impotent to change society. Since societies do not change in this manner, political decisions at odds with the underlying economic realities must ultimately be sustained by force—usually, by terror (terror being the political repression of unintended consequences). While such techniques may achieve their purposes in the short term they remain, ultimately, unsustainable.

I suggest we drop all use of the word “Revolution.” It sounds good, but without specification it lacks any definite content. It also has the almost invariant effect of giving people the impression that the change is political and can be sustained politically. We should ask instead what a revolution must accomplish so that it need not be sustained politically, by a political authority that controls or attempts to control economic and social life. Politics cannot fundamentally change the structure of the society without that new society being dependent upon the whims of some political authority.

For Marx, ultimately the change that is needed is not political, at least not primarily so. Nor can the exercise of political will, however democratic, sustain socioeconomic change. Socioeconomic change will sustain any future political changes. This economic structure would be a complex, dynamic system that would have to be self-regulating in some way. The place to begin to look for what Marx conceived of as a self-sustaining socialist society is his *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Here Marx, the theorist of socialism, emerges from Marx, the theorist of capitalism, in *Capital*. If he is correct about the inner workings of the capitalist economy, his theory of capital is a good start to figure out in what ways a socialist economy would have to differ. In his *Critique*, socialism is conceived of as a new economic structure that would give rise to different patterns of daily life, new opportunities, and new patterns of making policy, such that individuals can better take control of their own lives—in other words, as Marx put it, the full and free development of each is the condition for the full and free development of all. And this free development depends not on political decisions but on new economic relations. **IP**

Rejoinder, continued from page 2

- Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1983), 143.
- Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 266. This essay, a “dialectical epilegomenon” to his book *Negative Dialectics* that Adorno said intended to bring together “philosophical speculation and drastic experience” (*Critical Models*, 126), was one of the last writings he finished for publication before he died in 1969. It reflected his dispute with fellow Frankfurt School critical theorist Hebert Marcuse over the student protests of the Vietnam War (see Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” trans. Esther Leslie, *New Left Review* 1/233, Jan.–Feb. 1999, 123–136). As Adorno put it in his May 5, 1969 letter to Marcuse,

[T]here are moments in which theory is pushed on further by practice. But such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow. [“Correspondence,” 127]

- Rosa Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution,” in *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 80.
- Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 40–41.
- Karl Marx to Domela Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881, in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Correspondence, 1846–1895*, trans. Dona Torr (New York: International Publishers, 1942), 387, <www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/let-387/81_02_22.htm>.
- As Luxemburg put it in 1915 in *The Crisis of German Social Democracy* [aka *The Junius Pamphlet*, available online at <www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/>],

Marx says [in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)]: “[T]he democrat [that is, the petty bourgeois revolutionary] [comes] out of the most shameful defeats as unmarked as he naively went into them; he comes away with the newly gained conviction that he must be victorious, not that he or his party ought to give up the old principles, but that conditions ought to accommodate him.” The modern proletariat comes out of historical tests differently. Its tasks and its errors are both gigantic: no prescription, no schema valid for every case, no infallible leader to show it the path to follow. Historical experience is its only school mistress. Its thorny way to self-emancipation is paved not only with immeasurable suffering but also with countless errors. The aim of its journey—its emancipation depends on this—is whether the proletariat can learn from its own errors. Self-criticism, remorseless, cruel, and going to the core of things is the life’s breath and light of the proletarian movement. The fall of the socialist proletariat in the present world war [WWI] is unprecedented. It is a misfortune for humanity. But socialism will be lost only if the international proletariat fails to measure the depth of this fall, if it refuses to learn from it.

- Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program,” in *Marx–Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. [New York: W. W. Norton, 1978], 533–534, <www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>. Marx wrote,

In fact, the internationalism of the program stands even infinitely below that of the Free Trade party. The latter also asserts that the result of its efforts will be “the international brotherhood of peoples.” But it also does something to make trade international...The international activity of the working classes does not in any way depend on the existence of the International Working Men’s Association.

1. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 27.

What are intellectuals good for?

A discussion with George Scialabba

Spencer A. Leonard

On Thursday November 19, 2009, Platypus Review Editor-in-Chief Spencer A. Leonard discussed with author George Scialabba a new volume of essays entitled What are Intellectuals Good For? (Boston: Pressed Wafer Press, 2009). Their discussion was conducted live on "Radical Minds," a radio show Leonard conducts weekly with co-host Greg Gabrellas on WHPK 88.5 FM in Chicago. Leonard and Scialabba's discussion focused chiefly on a single theme of the book, the connections and disconnects between the intellectuals of the anti-Stalinist Old Left forged in America in the 1930s and the New Left that emerged decades later in the early 1960s. What follows is an edited transcript of their discussion.

Spencer Leonard: Recently published by Pressed Wafer Press in 2009, George Scialabba's *What Are Intellectuals Good For?* is a collection of book reviews that, taken together, constitutes an extensive tour through the ruinous history of modern American leftist intellectualism stretching back into the 1930s and beyond. Now regarding the book, I wanted to start off by asking your views on the New Left, who receive considerable treatment in this book, albeit in a largely oblique way. I say this because the views you express here on the New Left, and of your own generation's political experience, are marked by a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, you celebrate its questioning, almost naïve character, as evidenced for you by the Port Huron Statement; on the other hand, you lament your generation's failure to produce towering leftist intellectuals and, by implication, a strong Left capable of achieving a more just and emancipated future. You seem largely to agree with Russell Jacoby and others who claim that something has been deeply amiss on the Left for a long time now. For instance, on page 4 you say, "the New Left, for all its promise of vitality, originality, and engagement now seems safely integrated, largely insulated from public influence." You note the evacuation of leftism from the New Left, yet it seems that to a large degree you exonerate the New Left from the charge of being inadequate to the tasks of its time. Instead, you attribute the eclipse of the Left politically and of leftist public intellectualism generally to external factors, such as the growth of empirical knowledge and the proliferation of mass media. But how far can this be defended? Can we really speak of the age of information as overwhelming intellectuals' ability to speak critically in a way qualitatively distinct from the situation obtaining earlier in the century?

George Scialabba: No one is adequate to her time, especially among 17–21 year-olds. I am, on the whole, an admirer of the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s. Among contemporary leftists, the New Left is less a living presence or project than it is a slightly awkward memory. It is widely thought that the New Left played a large part in preparing the way for Nixon's victory and for the general backlash against liberalism, the New Deal, and the Great Society. I think that is overstated, but it is partially true. Certainly, there were a lot of loudmouths and rowdies and other obnoxious people in the New Left. There always are such people in every social movement, and they get more than their share of publicity. But the New Left did do something profoundly important: to invoke a slogan of the times, they questioned authority in a way more direct and unashamed than most of their predecessors in American intellectual and political history—they had a more direct and unashamed moral passion. They saw the promise of American life. The Port Huron statement is really in some ways a paean to the American republican tradition. They understood that civic virtue really was essential to a viable society and to the health of American democracy. They were not young Maoists or Leninists deluded and besotted by ideology. They simply wanted America to live up to its promise. They saw the massive injustice of racial inequality and the barbarity of the technological onslaught in Indochina, and they responded with a certain intellectual clarity and an unmistakable moral passion. They did not give their arguments the high finish that appeals to editorialists at the *New York Times*, but they accomplished something very important. They faded away ingloriously and left tangled memories behind, but on the whole, it was a very salutary response from which the contemporary Left can learn.

Leonard: I agree with the idea that there is much in the New Left in its formative period that vanishes without a trace. But both in your answer and in the book you refer to the retread of Stalinism that we saw with the Black Panthers, the Weather Underground, and many other prominent groups that arose from the mainstream of the New Left—so, I still wonder how to connect the kind of honesty, naïveté, directness, and plain speaking that you admire in the New Left with the inadequate organizational and ideological expressions that came out of it. It seems we would need a more complex account of the forces that gave rise to the New Left and the dynamics that operated within it to explain how it collapsed as a Left in the 1970s and 1980s.

Scialabba: Well, the Weathermen grabbed the spotlight,

explosively, so to speak, but they were a tiny splinter. SDS had to some extent already run out of steam, or had, at least temporarily, run out of energy by then. The Weatherman, under the evil guidance of the old Left groups such as the Progressive Labor Party, seized leadership positions on national and some influential local chapters, and pretty much ran the institution into the ground. Students started getting bizarre Leninist/Maoist communiqués from the central committee and just kind of dropped off.

Leonard: Did you participate in that personally? Did you have a role in the student Left in the 60s?

Scialabba: In 1969–70 I was at Columbia University where I saw this unfolding. Though I was not really very involved, I was close enough to see it happening more or less firsthand. I think the media was actually looking for this sort of thing to play up in order to discredit the student Left generally, and the student leadership certainly played into those designs. These are young people: of course they are irresponsible and failing to show the proper degree of intellectual deference. Again, I do not mean there was any conspiracy, but I do think there is a good deal of intellectual dishonesty and poverty of imagination on the part both of the mass media and of academia in interpreting this sorry history.

Leonard: I recognize that this discussion threatens to edge away from the leading themes of your book, so to bring it back a little I want to ask, to what extent do you think that the Old Left generation—the kind of figures that you are talking about in the book, coming from the *Partisan Review*, people who had really cut their teeth on the critique of Stalinism in the 1930s—to what extent did that intellectual cohort really prepare and, in a sense, educate the generation that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s? To what extent, indeed, can the disconnect between the Old Left and the New be understood as merely a breakdown of inter-generational communication? And to what degree do you think that the innocence and naïveté of youth grew into a critical and theoretical failing of the New Left? Was their ill-preparedness for the political challenges that their generation faced a consequence of their inability to work through the problems they had inherited from the past?

Scialabba: I am not as versed in the specific history of the New Left and SDS as many others but my impression is that there was, and there always is with social movements, a smaller group, a few seed groupings, who

were quite conscious of the American left-wing tradition, both of the native tradition of anarchists like Randolph Bourne, Paul Goodman, and Dwight Macdonald, and of the European leftist tradition, as with the *Partisan Review* group. To some extent, figures like Macdonald and C. Wright Mills bridged those traditions. I think those who were thus rooted in the American Left found a ready audience among their peers, especially given the rising consciousness of racial inequality and the rising tide of barbarism in Indochina. Students who were predisposed by whatever predisposes people to passionate political involvement responded to politically self-aware leaders. They in turn joined the movement, went out and demonstrated, talked to their families, their friends, and their neighbors—just the way social movements happen. And discouraging things happened, as the police became nasty, editorials became snooty, and professors became disapproving, they quavered and then, as I say, the professional revolutionaries, the Weathermen, the Stalinists, moved in to seize control, as is typical of Leninist, professional revolutionary, vanguardists. With their ideological delusions they wrecked a slow-moving and erratic but nonetheless genuine social movement. I do think that among those early people, the seed groupings, there was an awareness of, and a real desire to learn from, the older leftists. Tom Hayden, for example, and the other authors of the Port Huron Statement were eager to meet Michael Harrington, Irving Howe, and Paul Goodman, and they did meet them. My admiration for Harrington and Goodman is very great, but the fact is—and there is plenty of blame on both sides—but the fact is, although their specific criticisms of the youngsters were true enough, the results were an emotional disaster.

Leonard: This you discuss in the essay on Irving Howe.

Scialabba: Well, they made more than they needed to of the students' insufficient emancipation from Marxist ideology and revolutionary rhetoric. They were quite right, but it is something they did not give the students time to learn for themselves. They could have been encouraging, usefully critical, but instead they chose to come down on them like a ton of bricks. Then again, 17–21 year-olds are not always able to be discriminating. They heard this, felt cast out and furious, and the relationship between the Old Left and the New Left went to hell.

Leonard: At the center of this book, even in the essays that do not directly address their writings, you come back time and again to a generation of writers that we

"Discussion" continues below

Discussion, continued from above

would associate with the 1930s and 1940s, with the journal the *Partisan Review*, and with the city of New York. I want to ask about the reticence you have towards many of those writers' Marxist commitments. A lot of them abandoned Communism for Trotskyism over the course of the 1930s. It seems to me that you tend to shy away from direct discussion of this. Indeed, your book really focuses only on those who broke their ties with Trotskyism, so that figures such as Max Shachtman, whose influence was surely considerable, fall out of the discussion. I wonder if your wariness of this kind of politics does not compromise our ability to understand not only what made that group of intellectuals great, but also what made them a group. After all, many of the "New York Intellectuals" shared a set of commitments and orientations, so that, for a lot of them, the turn to Trotskyism was a turn, not away from the Left, but towards it. They saw the Communist Party and others as more conservative than themselves and considered those organizations incapable of bringing about the kind of change that they wanted to see brought about. They recognized that, in a sense, the whole legacy of the European revolutionary tradition, from the French Revolution to the rise of the labor movement and of mass socialist parties, threatened to amount to nothing, or worse than nothing—a dread we can see expressed perhaps most clearly in Edmund Wilson's *To The Finland Station*. What do we say today of such political commitments, and how does that inform our sense of tragedy

respecting that generation of intellectuals?

Scialabba: I have enormous respect for left-wing Marxism. I have studied *Capital* with the son of one of the great Marxist theorists of the 20th century, Paul Mattick, and I was affiliated for many years with one of the tiny libertarian Marxist groups that he founded in Cambridge. But, on the whole, I do not think Marxism historically has contributed much of anything useful to the American Left. I think the native tradition of Goodman, Edward Bellamy, Bourne, Macdonald, and others is more fruitful. One reason why I did not deal more with people like Shachtman and the Trotskyists you mentioned, is that the people I mostly wrote about were literary-political intellectuals; that is, they were people who drew much of their evidence for and standards in moral argument from the humanistic tradition. They may have started out as pretty rigorous orthodox Marxists, but they stopped arguing for the most part in Marxist terms and began mostly arguing as humanists. Again, Dwight MacDonald and the *Partisan Review* crowd in America, George Orwell in England, Albert Camus in France, and Nicola Chiaromonte in Italy—what they carried over from Marxism was something often lacking in American radicalism, a respect for European high culture and, of course, a sense of the importance of understanding capitalism as a system. But I do not know that the Marxist analyses of American capitalism ever proved to be very influential in the history of the American Left, nor am I sure that

they deserved to be. I think that it is possible, and in fact likely, that an effective, stable, permanent, successful American Left can be built—if the world does not melt or blow up before then—largely from a basis of common morality, humanism, and simple democracy, as a fulfillment of American Western democratic ideals, and of the solidaristic, universalistic, moral imagination of Western radicalism from Tolstoy to William Morris and so on. I do not know that the Left needs or will get that much help from Marxist theory.

Leonard: One last question on that. I agree with the connection you make between the views of Michael Walzer and those of Richard Rorty, but I always had a problem with politics rooted in literary or moralist traditions, especially when these are conceived as national. Part of what I would take from Marxism is a vision of freedom that seeks more than justice, that is not straightforwardly ethical, and that looks to future, rather than tradition, for emancipatory potential. To me, Marxism seeks to do more than translate our morals into the political domain, but attempts to open the way to new forms of sociality that we lack a clear view of now. But you strike something like a tone of bemusement when you discuss Jacoby's arguing for a world in which people work less and more fulfillingly and are capable of different and freer kinds of family, sexual, and intimate relations. If we lose touch with that critical tradition, which looks not to our national culture, but to global capitalist society and its potential, do we not risk losing the politics of emancipation?

Scialabba: I agree entirely. I must not have said it right in that piece on Jacoby, because I certainly endorse that kind of utopian visionary thinking. I was unhappy that he kept insisting that the social democratic reformists like Robert Kuttner or Michael Harrington, and journals like *In These Times*, *The American Prospect*, and *Dissent*, simply did not get it. This, to me, was not helping. As I said in that essay, I am a 20th century Utopian. I think we are going to get there, if we are to survive as a species. But it will be stepwise and, for the time being, I think the reformists he criticized are the people we should work with, rather than the negative utopians like Adorno. **IP**



Dwight Macdonald, editor of the *Partisan Review* during the years 1937 to 1943, speaking at the "Counter Commencement" of Columbia University in June 1968. Generally friendly to the Columbia student left, he spoke of them as "the best generation I have known in this country, the cleverest and the most serious and decent." At the Counter Commencement, Macdonald reversed himself, arguing that the students risked destroying the university, in which case "they would have nothing to replace it."

Rosa Luxemburg’s legacy

A reply to Jerzy Sobotta

Uli vom Hagen

THE ASSUMPTION THAT ROSA LUXEMBURG’S CORPSE has significance for the state of the German Left, though perhaps not her body, is tempting. Luxemburg was a Polish socialist involved in a European socialist movement during a time when there was no sovereign Polish state. She was successively a member of the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany. As is well known, she also cofounded with Karl Liebknecht the Spartakusbund, and was briefly co-leader of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). In 1918–19 the socialist revolution in Germany was betrayed by the SPD, which is responsible for Luxemburg’s murder. Her murder matters as the pure expression of precisely that revisionism that Luxemburg had so ably critiqued. However, Jerzy Sobotta, writing in *Platypus Review* 16 (October 2009), does not seem to be interested in *this* legacy of Rosa Luxemburg, the legacy of free thought and revolutionary Marxism.

There is much to say regarding Luxemburg’s legacy for the revolutionary Left of German Social Democracy, not least her criticism of the politics of Lenin and Trotsky. In his article, Sobotta neglects to discuss the summer and autumn of 1923, arguably the second most important period for the German Left after World War I due to its potential for the regeneration of a social revolution in Germany and Europe once the principles of the October Revolution had been narrowed by the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Karl Radek, close to Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky, as well as a leading figure in the Comintern, traveled from Russia to Germany in early 1923. There Radek and the KPD leadership recognized in the new leftwing SPD government in Saxony an opportunity to advance toward a second German revolution. This was the reason why Radek proposed at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in June 1923 that the KPD enlarge the basis for the revolution by winning over patriotic workers and nationalist social revolutionaries in the Ruhr industry region. He thus embraced the “Schlageter Line,” which called for joining the workers’ resistance campaign against the French occupation and establishing thereby a “cross front,” or merger of national-revolutionary and revolutionary socialist forces. As Radek urged at the time,

The petty bourgeois masses and the intellectuals and technicians who will play a big role in the revolution are in a position of national antagonism to capitalism, which is declassing them...If we want to be a workers’ party that is able to undertake the

struggle for power, we have to find a way that can bring us near to these masses, and we shall find it not in shirking our responsibilities, but in stating that the working class alone can save the nation.¹

For Radek, taking party propaganda to the workers’ hunger and material needs alone was insufficient to win their hearts and minds. This was a break with Luxemburg, who had seen national determination only with reference to the needs of economic development. Radek, however, stood with Lenin in criticizing the inability of traditional German Marxist groups to grasp the workers’ desire for patriotic belonging. The proletariat’s nationalism was more than a cultural phenomenon; rather, it had a political dimension that was not opposed to communist internationalism. Indeed, it alone provided the necessary basis for international solidarity between the workers of different nations. Social revolutionary anti-capitalism of all sorts was vivid in 1920s Germany: the German National Bolshevik movement—very similar to Titoism in post-World War II Yugoslavia—was mainly formed by the experience of military communism in the trenches. It focused its anti-capitalism on young people from all classes rather than only on the proletariat, insisting that each nation find its own road to socialism. It had roots in the German Youth Movement, e.g. the Wandervogel, a back-to-nature movement emphasizing freedom, self-responsibility, the spirit of adventure, and older, culturally diverse traditions. This organization was anti-bourgeois and often Teutonic-pagan, composed mostly of middle class young people organizing themselves in autonomous cells called “Bunde” (bands). It generally allowed Jews into its ranks. Racism and anti-Semitism were not issues for National Bolsheviks who derived much of their unity from a romantic, heroic, communitarian ethos and an utter hatred of what would become the Nazi party.

While Radek continued to combine the “Schlageter Line” and a united front with the left-wing Social Democrats, the class struggle in Germany intensified in the summer of 1923. Together with Trotsky, he fought tirelessly against the fatalism and complacency existing in both the German and Russian Communist parties and for a strict timetable for insurrection. This was opposed most strongly by Stalin, who argued that the workers still believed in social democracy. Ultimately, the armed uprising was set for November 9, 1923. To this end, the KPD joined leftwing SPD governments in Saxony and Thuringia on October 10 and 16, 1923, respectively, calculating they would gain access to the police armories. Because the left-wing Social Democrats eventually disapproved of the

insurrection, the KPD cancelled the plans for a general strike and concomitant uprising. The missed revolution of November 1923 would have dire consequences; that same month Adolf Hitler began his rise to power by staging a coup in Munich.

Almost a decade later, the infighting continued on the Left between German Social Democrats and Communists. This prevented the formation of an effective united front to fight Nazism. The last free parliamentary election of the Weimar Republic of November 6, 1932, saw a drop for Hitler’s NSDAP and increases for the KPD, although the Nazis remained the largest party. Moreover, legal power was handed to Hitler by bourgeois forces in January 1933, who even supported him in March 1933 by accepting the Enabling Act, a law that allowed Hitler to pass laws for four years without either parliamentary consent or control. Once the internationally prestigious event of the 1936 Olympic Games was over, the political climate became even worse. But the fascist regime was not internationally isolated. For example, in 1938, four months after the German annexation of Austria, the American industrialist Henry Ford accepted the Grand Cross of the German Eagle, the Nazi regime’s highest honor for foreigners before the outbreak of World War II. On November 9, 1938—not 1939—the fascist attacks against the Jewish German population had become more systematic, violent, and widespread. The SPD had long ceased to exist by that time, while the KPD could only survive on a much diminished basis underground, as many of their leading organizers were in concentration camps. Still, the Communists did eventually manage to get in contact with the young “Socialist Counts”² who became the German military insurrectionists of July 20, 1944. In fact, some of those officers stood in the National Bolshevik tradition.

But Sobotta’s dismissal of the National Bolshevik tradition is not his only error. After the war, the West German Left may have been bourgeois, but I fail to see how “these revolutionary children” would have agreed with the Old Nazis on an issue such as anti-Semitism, as Sobotta claims when he writes, “And this [the presence of Jewish survivors] proved to be unbearable, not only for the old Nazis, but also for their revolutionary children.” Those leftists, the revolutionaries of the 1960s, never called the legitimacy of a peaceful Jewish settler state into question. Rather, they were left perplexed and speechless by the atrocities the Jewish settlers inflicted on the Palestinians. Small, violent anti-Zionist groups like the terrorist RAF (aka the Baader-Meinhof Group) should not be seen as representative for the entire generation of the 1960s. Rather, many of the issues, ideas, and lifestyle practices of the American and German hippies of the 1960s and 1970s, such as vegetarianism, natural medicine and healing, nudism, and bohemian clothing, derive from the early 20th century German youth movement. The generation of 1968, however, was unable to advance a coherent anti-capitalism. As a consequence, they found themselves unable to check reformism in a decisive manner before the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.

The new Left Party of Germany (Die Linke) has many currents: social democratic, anti-capitalist, libertarian

socialist, syndicalist, reform communist, even Trotskyist. Consequently, it has many internal conflicts, but nevertheless represents a united front. Some in Die Linke, like Gregor Gysi, support Israel, while others support the Palestinians. But Sobotta accuses the whole party of being anti-Semitic and racist. There is certainly much wrong with Die Linke, but these charges are without foundation. Further, it is distasteful that Sobotta affirms the Antideutsch position that solidarity with Third World movements is solidarity with barbarism. Such arrogance reeks of much more than “unfreedom”; it derives from Western supremacism. Sobotta’s attempt to somehow tie Luxemburg’s murder to the collapse of the old German Left and to the mediocrity of Die Linke is unconvincing. In the place of a thoroughgoing analysis, he seems content to simply appropriate the memory of Luxemburg in the service of an apology for Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank.

There is good reason to believe that Die Linke is becoming yet another social democratic party, stabilizing capitalist reforms without building a base for independent working class political action. Such a failure would truly dishonor the memory of Luxemburg and her humane, democratic vision of communism. But this has not yet come to pass, so that today the Left can still learn from Luxemburg’s words: “The circumstances which divide socialist politics from bourgeois politics is that the socialists are opponents of the entire existing order and must function in a bourgeois parliament fundamentally as an opposition.”³

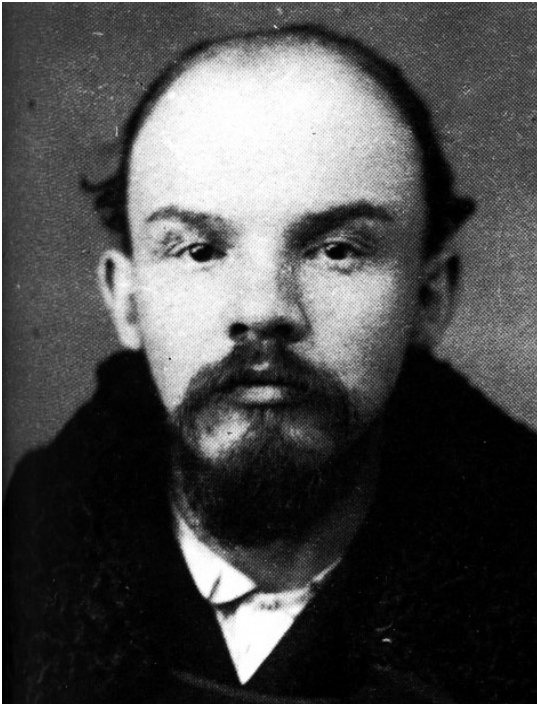
In Europe the Left’s dilemma is the transnational dimension of European Union politics while workers remain attached to a national understanding of politics. Luxemburg still has great significance to many European socialists, communists, and anti-capitalists—her legacy is a transnational one for a Europe with a new economic and political base that decentralizes power, allows for personal liberty, and extends wealth equally. Whether Die Linke and its European counterparts are truly ready to live up to Luxemburg’s legacy remains an open question. Her main contribution for a regeneration of the Left is her insistence on radical democracy within revolutionary Marxism. In the programmatic points of Die Linke there is much talk about “economic democracy,” which appears to hold great promise, though this concept has not yet been seriously expanded upon by the party’s leaders. Generally, socialism shall be redeveloped in a communal, creative, and participatory way. Some South and Central American societies are already working rigorously on this endeavor in promising ways that embrace the slogan, “The Left is dead! Long live the Left!” **IP**

1. Quoted in Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution 1917–1923* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 726.
2. See John Wheeler-Bennett, *Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918 – 1945* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 624.
3. Rosa Luxemburg, “The Socialist Crisis in France,” in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 102.

Rejoinder to David Black

On Karl Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*

Chris Cutrone



Police photo of Vladimir Ilich Lenin, taken after his arrest in 1895 for participation in the St. Petersburg Union of Struggle for the Liberation of the Working Class.

DAVID BLACK’S VALUABLE COMMENTS and further historical exposition (in *Platypus Review* 18, December 2009) of my review of Karl Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* (*Platypus Review* 15, September 2009) have at their core an issue with Korsch’s account of the different historical phases of the question of “philosophy” for Marx and Marxism. Black questions Korsch’s differentiation of Marx’s relationship to philosophy into three distinct periods: pre-1848, circa 1848, and post-1848. But attempting to defeat Korsch’s historical account of such changes in Marx’s approaches to relating theory and practice means avoiding Korsch’s principal point. It also means defending Marx on mistaken ground. Black considers that Korsch’s periodization—his recognition of changes—opens the door to criticizing Marx for inconsistency in his relation of theory to practice. But that is not so.

What makes Korsch’s essay “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923) important, to Benjamin and Adorno’s work for instance, and what relates it intrinsically to Lukács’s contemporaneous treatment of the question of the “Hegelian” dimension of Marxism in *History and Class Consciousness*, is Korsch’s discovery of the historically changing relation of theory and practice, and the self-consciousness of this problem, in the history of Marxism. This meant that the matter was, from a Marxian perspective, as Adorno put it in *Negative Dialectics*,

“not settled once and for all, but fluctuates historically.”¹ Indeed, as Adorno put it in a late essay,

If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the Romantics and denounced by the Socialists in their wake—except for the mature Marx.²

However one may wish to question the nuances Korsch’s specific historiographic periodization of the problem of Marxism as that of the relation of theory and practice, both during Marx’s lifetime and after, this should not be with an eye to either disputing or defending Marx or a Marxian approach’s consistency on the matter. One may perhaps attempt a more fine-grained approach to the historical “fluctuations” of what Adorno called the “constitutive” and indeed “progressive” aspect of the “separation of theory and praxis.” Korsch’s point in the 1923 “Marxism and Philosophy,” followed by Benjamin and Adorno, was that we must attend to this “separation,” or, as Adorno put it, “non-identity,” if we are to have a properly Marxian self-consciousness of the problem of “Marxism” in theory and practice. For this problem of the separation of theory and practice is not to be deplored, but calls for critical awareness. Marx was consistent in his own awareness of the relation of theory and practice. This meant that at different times Marx found them related in different ways.

By contrast, what has waylaid the sectarian “Marxist Left” has been the freezing of the theory-practice problem, which then continued to elude a progressive-emancipatory solution at any given moment. Particular historical moments in the theory-practice problem have become dogmatized by various sects, thus dooming them to irrelevance. So generations of ostensibly revolutionary “Marxists” have failed to heed the nature of Rosa Luxemburg’s praise of Lenin and Trotsky’s Bolsheviks in the October Revolution:

All of us are subject to the laws of history....The Bolsheviks have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of historical possibilities....What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescencies in the politics of the Bolsheviks. In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who

went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with Hutten: “I have dared!” This is the essential and *enduring* in Bolshevik policy. In *this* sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labor in the entire world.... And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to “Bolshevism.”³

The Bolshevik Revolution was not itself the achievement of socialism and the overcoming of capitalism, but it did nevertheless squarely address itself to the problem of grasping history so as to make possible revolutionary practice. The Bolsheviks recognized, in other words, that we are tasked, by the very nature of capital, in Marx’s sense, to struggle within and through the separation of theory and practice. The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 was the occasion and context for Korsch’s rumination on the theory and practice of Marxism in his seminal 1923 essay on “Marxism and Philosophy.”

In the extended aftermath of the failed revolution of 1917–19, the crisis of the Stalinization of Third International Communism and the looming political victory of fascism, Horkheimer, in an aphorism titled “A Discussion About Revolution,” addressed himself to the same subject Luxemburg and Korsch had discussed, from the other side of historical experience:

[A] proletarian party cannot be made the object of contemplative criticism....Bourgeois criticism of the proletarian struggle is a logical impossibility....At times such as the present, revolutionary belief may not really be compatible with great clear-sightedness about the realities.⁴

This is because, for Horkheimer, from a Marxian “proletarian” perspective, as opposed to a (historically) “bourgeois” one (including that of pre- or non-Marxian “socialism”), the problem is not a matter of formulating a correct theory and then implementing it in practice. It is rather a question of what Lukács called “historical consciousness.” We should note well how Horkheimer posed the theory-practice problem here, as the contradiction between “revolutionary belief” and “clear-sightedness about the realities.”

Horkheimer elaborated further that proletarian revolutionary politics cannot be conceived on the model of capitalist enterprise, and not only for socioeconomic class-hierarchical reasons, but rather because of the differing relation of theory and practice in the two instances; it is the absence of any “historical consciousness” of the theory and practice problem that makes “bourgeois criticism of the proletarian struggle” a *logical* “impossibility.” As Lukács put it, in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” (1923), “a *radical change in outlook is not feasible on the soil of bourgeois society*.” Rather, one must radically deepen—render “dialectical”—the outlook of the present historical moment. The point is that a Marxian perspective can find—and indeed has often found—itself far removed from the practical politics and (entirely “bourgeois”) ideological consciousness of the working class. This has not invalidated Marxism, but rather called for a further Marxian

critical reflection on its own condition.

In a letter of February 22, 1881 to the Dutch anarchist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, Marx wrote

It is my conviction that the critical juncture for a new International Working Men’s Association has not yet arrived and for that reason I regard all workers’ congresses or socialist congresses, in so far as they are not directly related to the conditions existing in this or that particular nation, as not merely useless but actually harmful. They will always ineffectually end in endlessly repeated general banalities.⁵

How much more is this criticism applicable to the “Left” today! But, more directly, what it points to is that Marx recognized no fixed relation of theory and practice that he pursued throughout his life. Instead, he very self-consciously exercised judgment respecting the changing relation of theory and practice, and considered this consciousness the hallmark of his politics. Marx’s *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852] excoriated “bourgeois” democratic politics, including that of contemporary socialists, for its inability to simultaneously learn from *history* and face the challenge of the *new*.⁶ How else could one judge that a moment has “not yet arrived” while calling for something other than “endlessly repeated banalities?”

Marx had a critical theory of the relation of theory and practice—recognizing it as a historically specific and not merely “philosophical” problem, or, a problem that called for the critical theory of the philosophy of history—and a political practice of the relation of theory and practice. There is not simply a theoretical or practical problem, but also and more profoundly a problem of relating theory and practice.

We are neither going to think our way out ahead of time, nor somehow work our way through, in the process of acting. We do not need to dissolve the theory-practice distinction that seems to paralyze us, but rather achieve both good theory and good practice in the struggle to relate them properly. It is not a matter of finding either a correct theory or correct practice, but of trying to judge and affect their *changing relation* and recognizing this as a problem of *history*.

Marx overcame the political pitfalls and historical blindness of his “revolutionary” contemporaries, such as the pre-Marxian socialism of Proudhon *et al.* leading to 1848, anarchism in the First International, and the Lassallean trend of the German Social-Democratic Party. It is significant that Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* [1875] critiqued the residual Lassallean politics of the Social Democrats for being to the Right of the liberals on international free trade, etc., thus exposing the problem of this first “Marxist” party from the outset.⁷

Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, following Marx, recovered and struggled through the problem of theory and practice for their time, precipitating a crisis in Marxism, and thus advancing it. They overcame the “vulgar Marxist” ossification of theory and practice in the Second International, as Korsch and Lukács explained. It meant the Marxist critique of Marxism, or, an emancipatory critique of emancipatory politics—a Left critique of the Left. This is not a finished task. We need to attain this ability again, for our time. **IP**